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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [BM](#) [ASSK](#) [NLD](#)

SUBJECT: BURMA: A TOUGH WEEK AND A MISERABLE YEAR FOR THE DEMOCRATIC OPPOSITION

REF: A. RANGOON 201

[B](#). RANGOON 196

[C](#). RANGOON 185

[D](#). 04 RANGOON 1647 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: COM Carmen Martinez for Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

[1](#). (C) Summary: It's been a long week for the democratic opposition: Burma's most influential pro-democracy ethnic leader is behind bars; the regime put NLD leader U Tin Oo on notice that he, like Aung San Suu Kyi, will likely spend a third consecutive year in detention; the NLD, possibly to forestall a further regime crackdown, expelled 18 of its key members; and the regime reconvened its sham National Convention, completely ignoring the NLD and snuffing a potential boycott by the ethnic cease-fire groups. It's also been a long year: the regime has banned the UNSYG's special envoy for nearly 12 months and the last visit of the UN's human rights envoy is a distant memory; Burma's neighbors increasingly favor a pro-engagement approach (a tremendous boost to the regime generals); and the SPDC's campaign of harassment, intimidation, and arrest perpetuates a climate of fear, rendering the democracy movement disunited and dispirited. Local anticipation that Burma's 2006 ascension to the ASEAN chair will be an opportunity for change, or that the regime itself will implode, are the only sources of a steadily waning light of hope at the end of the opposition's long tunnel to democracy. End Summary.

[2](#). (SBU) Nearly two years have passed since GOB-sponsored thugs attacked Aung San Suu Kyi's (ASSK) convoy of National League for Democracy (NLD) party members and supporters in northern Burma. That dramatic event in May 2003 was a watershed for the pro-democracy movement, which was subsequently forced further underground and increasingly marginalized by a Burmese military regime that has lowered the tolerance bar for dissent to an all-time low.

[3](#). (C) The continued detention of its primary leadership--namely ASSK, U Tin Oo, and now Hkun Htun Oo--has rendered the democracy movement hopelessly disunited and dispirited. Continued harassment, intimidation, and arrests of political party members and supporters perpetuates a climate of fear--making dissent palatable only for those willing to risk losing their paltry incomes, their property, their families, or even their own lives. Since March 2004 the regime has banned a visit by the UN Secretary General's Special Envoy (Razali), perceived by the opposition as ineffective but nonetheless an important link to the outside world. The last visit (November 2003) granted to the UN's Special Rapporteur for Human Rights (Pinheiro), who championed the cause of Burmese political dissidents, is a distant memory.

[4](#). (SBU) Furthermore, the pro-engagement posture of China, India, and ASEAN continue to boost the regime's perceived legitimacy and deny democracy activists their hopes for regional solidarity. The SPDC generals appear more confident than ever that the democratic opposition is the least of their worries, choosing to ignore the NLD altogether and instead focus efforts on bringing the country's restive ethnic groups under full central authority, building bridges and dams, and perpetuating military rule.

[5](#). (C) It's been a very tough year, but February 18 brings to a close a particularly depressing week for Burma's beleaguered democracy movement. Among the low points:

--On February 9, authorities arrested Hkun Htun Oo, the country's most influential pro-democracy ethnic leader, and several other members of his Shan Nationalities League for Democracy party (ref C); and arrests of other ethnic leaders are also in the works (authorities detained U Ohn Tin, leader of the Arakan League for Democracy, on February 18). Security agents this week raided Hkun Htun Oo's home and office, shut down his private courier business, detained and interrogated members of his family and his employees, transferred him to prison, and apparently charged him as a "subversive threat" under Section 10(a) of a 1975 law "Safeguarding the State from the Danger of Subversive Elements." Rarely have detainees charged under this provision served less than twelve months in prison; most languish behind bars for years.

--On the night of February 13, a half dozen GOB authorities visited the home of NLD Vice Chairman U Tin Oo, where he has been detained under house arrest since an eight-month prison stint following the May 2003 convoy attack. According to sources, the authorities read U Tin Oo an official decree, reportedly signed by the Minister for Home Affairs, prolonging his detention for another year under Section 10(b) of the "Subversive Elements" law. The regime similarly extended ASSK's house arrest in December 2004 for another year (ref D).

--On February 7, authorities arrested officials of the Shan State Peace Council (SSPC), the political wing of two Shan State cease-fire groups (ref A). Pro-democracy activists were initially heartened when the two groups, the Shan State Army North (SSA-N) and the Shan State National Army (SSNA), threatened to boycott the National Convention (NC) and perhaps lead other CFGs to follow suit. However, on February 15, SPDC representatives pressed four SSNA delegates to relocate to the Convention site north of Rangoon, where they will remain essentially "captive" for the duration of the session. The SSA-N delegation, on the other hand, has to date still refused to attend the NC, but in order to avoid the wrath of the generals, submitted an official "leave request" which allows the regime to identify the organization as registered ("99.44 percent Convention attendance of all delegates," trumpeted the official media on opening day, February 17). A dramatic boycott of the NC by the cease-fire groups, therefore, appears to be a bust.

--On February 16 and 17, the Central Executive Committee of the NLD circulated internal decision memos dismissing a total of 18 members from the party, including four Members-elect of Parliament. Although there are rumors the NLD leadership is unhappy with internal dissent, the move appears to be connected to the party's efforts to distance itself from an exile-led, underground movement to announce the formation of a parallel government inside Burma (ref B). Some of the dismissed NLD members had previously called upon party leaders to declare a parallel government, though it is uncertain whether they had any contact with "unlawful (exile) organizations." In any case, the NLD has in the past taken such draconian steps as a measure to protect party members from near-certain arrest or to deter the SPDC from banning the party outright (indeed, the NLD was forced to "expel" ASSK and U Tin Oo from the party while they were in detention during the 1990 election period). Nonetheless, the NLD ouster of 18 key members, including nine party youth greatly needed to replenish aging leaders, was another blow to the morale of the party's rank and file.

--On February 17, the SPDC reconvened the National Convention, on hiatus since July 2004. The overwhelming majority of Burmese recognizes the NC for what it is: a concocted sham to rubber stamp a pre-determined constitution that enshrines a perpetual, preeminent governance role for the Burmese armed forces. Nonetheless, it is the only political show in town and, in the process of plowing ahead on its "road map to a disciplined democracy," the SPDC has completely disregarded the democratic opposition. Unlike the weeks preceding the May 2004 reconvening of the NC, this time around the regime did not even bother to extend token invitations to selected pro-democracy party members, initiate insincere back-channel negotiations, or criticize the NLD's stance. Although many local observers believe the NLD, and the ethnic democrats, are just and righteous in their refusal to partake in the charade, the reality is that they will be on the distant sidelines in the coming weeks and months as NC delegates dither and pontificate over a new, albeit pre-packaged, constitution.

Comment: Which Way to the Elysian Fields?

16. (C) Is there a light at the end of the opposition's long tunnel to democracy? If there is, it has dimmed considerably over the past year, and events this past week have seemingly pushed the democracy movement's modest objectives for genuine political dialogue even further out of reach. The detention of opposition leaders is perhaps the most harmful to the movement, leaving the reins of pro-democracy efforts in the hands of an aging leadership in fragile health (the NLD) or often less capable politicians (the ethnics). The only short-term hope for an improvement in the situation appears to be local anticipation that Burma's ascension to the ASEAN chair in 2006 will force the region to address seriously the embarrassing behavior of the SPDC. The only medium- to long-term hope we hear from democracy activists is that the regime itself will implode. The current generals, however, have doggedly held on to "temporary" power for 17 years. It will take more than hope to pry their fingers loose. End Comment.  
Martinez